

Future Lessons From Past Leaders — The Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery

By Rhea Blanken, Results Technology, Bethesda MD.

Beyond the job description... Sacagawea's lasting contribution

Through examination of the Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery's expedition, the reviewer cannot help but be impressed by the extra-ordinary partnership they demonstrated as co-leaders. The Corps itself persevered for well over three years in a unique partnership. At times, their logistical and resource choices may have been erroneous (based on incorrect assumptions and unconscious biases), yet the Corps learned to take advantage of even their failures as they moved the expedition forward.

They used their scouting, hunting, carpentry, blacksmith skills and army experience to guarantee their survival every day. On their journey, they counted on receiving information and navigational guidance from trappers, traders, and Indians along the way to refine their course, gain knowledge of the wilderness and secure their survival. Several interpreters were enrolled for support.

#5 Lesson: Make Contribution Your Responsibility

While the Corps of Discovery carried the names of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as co-leaders, Sacagawea is now the third best-known and recognized member of that expedition. She has more statues dedicated to her in the United States than any other American woman. Two sites along the expedition's path are named after her, Sacagawea River and Sacagawea Spring. In 2000, a US silver dollar was dedicated to her, and in 2001, President Clinton named her an honorary sergeant in the regular army. It is considered likely that without her going above and beyond her job description of interpreter's wife, the Corps success would have been greatly reduced.

Lewis & Clark wanted her along from the moment Charbonneau, her French husband and guide, requested she accompany him on the journey. They knew that having a woman travel with a party of men was seen as a "token of peace" by Indians, assuring the Corp was not hostile even though they carried lots of firepower and were mostly made up of military men. They also assumed she would be invaluable when they reached the Shoshone Indians, since that was her native tribe. When they had their first formal meeting with the Shoshone Chief, she was the translator. The chief turned out to be her brother!

Sacagawea was invaluable from the moment the Corps left the Mandan Village—from her knowledge of edible roots and plants that provided food and medicine throughout the expedition to rescuing irreplaceable papers swept overboard.

#6 Lesson: Job Descriptions Are Only Part Of What's Possible

Many other Indian women along the journey were of critical assistance and yet the observations recorded by the men represented women along their journey as second-class citizens. The roles and responsibilities they assigned them were far short of their actual capabilities and their expectations of value for the expedition initially underestimated.



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Fixed in the Corps' mindset was an interpretation of women that had Sacagawea and other native women's efforts invisible when they were actually extraordinary. Their writings and reports all too often represented unexamined biases rather than opportunities to experience full partnerships with those along their journey. For example: the Corps did not know or realize that only Indian women, not the men, were allowed to touch the land— thus keeping the land uncontaminated. Gathering crops and searching for healing roots were *sacred* acts of women while the Corps saw drudgery. Women were also in control of their work and owned what they produced while women of the new democracy did not.

A good example of the unconscious bias the Corps had for roles and responsibilities—on the journey west, Lewis & Clark gave the men of the Mandan Village a corn mill as an act of friendship. As it was intended to advance the tribe's productivity, they mistakenly gave it to the men to use. But it was the women who planted, tended and harvested the corn before grinding it into meal. On their eastward return, the Corps stopped back through the Mandan Village. There they found the mill rusting and being used by the men for target practice. The Corps' gift to the Mandan tribe demonstrated limitations on their way of looking at the world. The mill's value was defined within a certain set of roles and responsibilities.

It matters now more than ever how we encourage or thwart contribution from others eager to go beyond their roles or to expand their responsibilities. As broad social change continues and our society and culture expands, we must recognize our historic preconception and be prepared to modify and adapt them. Our convenient blindness to rigid governance structures and passé employment systems hinder initiative and innovation. The legacy Sacagawea embodied was one of team members empowering one another to go beyond expectations, for reaching beyond one's current position and not to limit contribution.

*“I have seen that in any great undertaking, it is not
enough for a man to depend simply upon himself.”*
—Lone Man, Teton Sioux

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